

Premier Williams' broken promise

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Sandy Pond situated in the hills above Long Harbour. Pond is designated for destruction by toxic pollution from the Vale Inco hydromet processing facility.
(photo: Bill Montevecchi)

“No more give-aways” Premier Danny Williams

This is indeed an impressive orientation – no more corporate give-aways of the natural resources of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Fast forward to August 26, 2008, Minister of Environment Charlene Johnson releases Vale Inco from further environmental assessment pending conditions. To not make too fine a point of it, this release allows the multinational corporation to pollute and kill all the wildlife and vegetation in Sandy Pond, a watershed on the highlands above Long Harbour, Placentia Bay. This magnificent pristine pond is 38 hectares in area or about twice the size of Quidi Vidi Lake.

Sandy Pond provides habitat for trophy-sized brook trout as well as American eels and is a favored fishing spot for anglers.

The alternative to the destruction of Sandy Pond is the creation of an artificial containment pond to receive the plant's acid generating wastes, estimated to be almost 400,000 tonnes per year. The expenses (investments) involved in the construction of a containment pond would create lots of jobs. Yet this construction was considered too expensive, even at a time when metal prices are very high, and Inco is reaping enormous billions of dollar profits. So the corporation proposes and the Williams' government approves it to be more cost-effective to destroy a valuable and irreplaceable freshwater pond.

Under Canada's Fisheries Act it is illegal to dump toxic chemicals into fish-bearing waters.

Owing to pressure from mining interests however, the Act's Metal Mining Effluent Regulation was amended in 2002 to allow lakes, ponds and other water bodies to be classified as "tailing impoundment areas." Newfoundland and Labrador is a Canadian leader in water body degradation by mining industries. Our provincial and federal governments cooperated to allow Aur Industries to pollute (read kill) Trout Pond and Gill's Brook tributary in Buchans as toxic containment sites. These were the first water bodies in Canada to be legally destroyed by mining effluent. These actions were precedent-setting and have led to numerous proposals by mining companies to dump toxins into natural fish-bearing water bodies across the country rather than construct containment sites. In the US, the deliberate pollution of natural fish-bearing lakes is illegal. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Williams' government is employing third world environmental tactics in its promotion of global economic initiatives.

The long-term environmental, social and ethical costs that this action entails are not factored into the spurious economic logic that favors the destruction of Sandy Pond. These very real costs are both high and long-lasting. The water pollution, wildlife deaths and environmental degradation will far outlive the 15-year nickel extraction and processing exercise.

The environmental destruction-for-profit approach establishes a dangerous developmental strategy. God-given birthrights to a clean, safe and unpolluted environment do not have to be sacrificed for development. And development does not always have to be opposed to help ensure unpolluted and safe environments. The Vale Inco Health, Safety and Environmental Policy reads "to contribute to the enhancement of the environment through activities such as the protection and improvement of biodiversity and responsible land use planning"

(http://vinl.valeinco.com/PDFs/HSE_Policy.pdf). This is truly a noble aspiration, but noble action rather than aspiration is what's needed.

The Williams' government's role in this give-away is of major environmental, economic and ethical proportions. Premier Williams has been highly successful in his economic ventures for the province. Yet the environment is another and sadder story altogether.

From the outset of his term in office, Premier Williams has preached the importance of keeping a promise without compromise. By the action of his government in Long Harbour, Placentia Bay he has demonstrated something else - that sometimes it depends ...

Gannets and oil slicks off southern Labrador

During late August, Patsy Ploughman, Bobbie Mayer and Janet Montevecchi observed many 100s of gannets streaming past Point Armour. This seabird activity coincided with reports of an oil slick reported on 25 August. A slick of apparent bunker C fuel was thought to spread over a 3 to 4 km stretch from L'Anse au Loup to Fox Cove. Oiled gannets were seen on the beaches.

A number of people in that area have observed that oil slicks are often seen following periods of southwesterly winds. Some think that the oil may be coming from one or more of the sunken wrecks off Point Armour.

Patsy called the Coast Guard hotline, and a vessel was in the area within hours but apparently did not find any sign of a slick. Given the nature and strength of the currents in the area, this did not seem surprising.

Self-reporting the oil spill at the White Rose platform

On 11 September, CBC reported that Husky Oil reported a spill of 38 barrels (4479 litres) of oil during off-loading from the White Rose platform to a tanker, when a transfer hose burst. A Husky spokesperson also indicated that no oiled seabirds had been observed.

There has been and will be no independent corroboration of this information. The few fly-overs that have been conducted would likely be unable to detect any dark and oiled birds in the turbulent seas. There could be significant seabird mortality in this highly biologically productive area on the edge of the Grand Bank that provides important habitat for many birds and fish.

A throughout investigation of the wildlife consequences of the spill would involve systematic vessel surveys in and around the oil slick. This has not been done. The CNLOBP, the regulatory agency for offshore hydrocarbon production, has provided no information. We tend to interpret absence of information as an indication (perhaps hope) that there is no problem. Yet this need not be so as was seen in the unfolding of the Terra Nova spill in 2004. Common sense relies on skepticism, vigilance and most importantly information.

Owl road-kills

Great horned owl road-kills were observed east of Springdale on the TCH (Bobbie Mayer, Janet Montevicchi) and near Trinity (Craig Purchase). Auto-strikes of owls are an unusual but relatively common occurrence. The nocturnal birds of prey likely hunt the roadways to capture crossing rodents. At times, they may even attempt to use the headlight illumination of vehicles to zero in on the prey, and sometimes they pay the ultimate price.

Out of the ordinary bird sightings

Rich MacDonald, a top-notch birder from the College of the Atlantic in Maine found some very exciting birds on a recent trip to Newfoundland. Some include a redwing in Tilting on 22 July, a Snow Goose flying over Rose Blanche and a dark phase Gyrfalcon in Port aux Choix, a Bonaparte's Gull in Port aux Basque, a Roseate Tern in Elliston, and a Dovekie in Burgeo.

Keep looking openly and skeptically.